

In Colloquy with Austen

Dancing with Mr. Darcy: Stories Inspired by Jane Austen and Chawton House

Introduction by Sarah Waters.
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Review by Pamela Regis.

Jane Austen has inspired what I think of as Austenworld—the realm of sequels, of YouTube tributes and travesties (sometimes hard to tell apart), of action figures, websites, print mash-ups, and the rest of the reactions to Austen that contemporary culture has visited upon her, and upon us, her readers. Many Janeites are appalled by most, if not all, of this—send-ups and reverent reworkings alike. However, for those of us who have ever thought of giving anything beyond Austen herself a go, this collection of short stories makes an excellent initial foray into Austenworld.

The 20 stories in this collection were chosen from more than 300 entries in the 2009 Jane Austen Short Story Award contest sponsored by Chawton House Library. The rules were simple: unpublished novelists were invited to submit a short story of between 2,000 and 2,500 words inspired by Jane Austen or Chawton House. Sarah Waters, author of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*, led a panel of judges, who winnowed the 300 down to the 20 published in this volume. From these shortlisted titles, the panel also chose a winning entry and two runners-up.

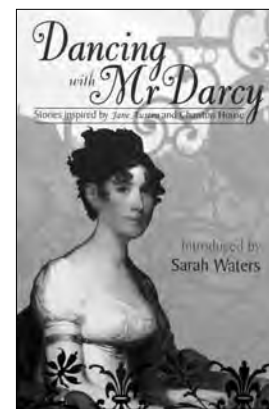
With an arresting first sentence, “Travelling to the infernal regions was easy,” Victoria Owens launches the winning story, “Jane Austen over the Styx.” In it, Jane Austen herself must, “like all mortals . . . answer the charges brought against her in the court of the dead.” Six old women serve as counsel for the prosecution: Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Ferrars, Mrs. Churchill, Lady Russell, and Mrs. Norris. The judge reads the charge: “[T]hat you,

Jane Austen, between the years 1775 and 1817 did maliciously undercut the respect due from youth to age, in that when you created female characters of advanced years, you willfully portrayed every one of them as a snob, a scold, or a harpy who selfishly or manipulatively interferes with the happiness of any innocent third party.” Owens deftly walks the compositional minefield of writing dialog for Austen. I commend her bravery and cheer her success.

Elsa A. Solender, president of JASNA from 1996 to 2000, flirts with the same explosive danger in “Second Thoughts,” one of two stories chosen as runners-up for the top prize. Imagining for us that day in 1802 when Austen accepted the proposal of Harris Bigg-Wither, and the following morning, when she changed her mind, we see Austen facing the same life-changing decision that she visited upon her heroines. Fanny Price comes most readily to mind, although her “Never, never, never” is more decided, and yet less wrenching, finally, than Solender’s version of Austen’s revoked acceptance. In “Jayne,” the second of the two runners-up, Kirsty Mitchell gives us a contemporary, Austen-quoting, flinty heroine who is making her living as a nude model for the tabloids and the “soft magazines” while reading English at university. Her economic aspirations bring to mind Austen’s own preoccupations with money. This story put me in mind of Jane Fairfax’s near-marginalization: Jayne’s temporary resignation to her profession highlighted the more permanent change in status that Jane Fairfax would have suffered as a governess.

All of the stories in the collection send the reader back to the novels. Although much has changed between the 21st century and the 19th, Austen’s characters endure. We encounter a 21st century Charlotte Lucas having her hair cut by a stylist named Lizzie in “We Need to Talk about Mr. Collins,” where author Mary Howell imagines Charlotte unmarried long after the point in her life when Austen’s

character accepted Collins’s proposal. In asking what Charlotte’s life as an unmarried woman might be like, Howell sends us back



to Charlotte’s decision in *Pride and Prejudice*, with renewed questions about what constitutes happiness, then and now. This impulse to imagine the characters outside of the novels is not new. Recall that Austen herself answered questions about her characters’ extra-textual lives.

Elinor and Marianne investigate a 19th-century crime in “The Delaford Ladies’ Detective Agency,” by Elizabeth Hopkinson, showing us the sisters after their marriages, with Elinor, as usual, the confidant of others, now applying her practical, ratiocinative self to the solution of a mystery. In another extrapolation set in Austen’s own time, Kelly Brendel’s “Somewhere,” we look in on the musing of a minor character whose thoughts Austen did not report. We are privy to Mrs. Grant’s thoughts during the rehearsal of *Lovers’ Vows* as she contemplates, some years into her marriage, the consequences of her acceptance of Dr. Grant’s proposal.

Every story is in colloquy with Austen’s own work, the new texts providing an occasion for comparison, reflection, and questioning in light of older works. Indeed, every story pays intelligent, literate tribute to Austen and her fiction, deepening our understanding of Austen and making Austenworld a much better place.

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